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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how writing coaching, which is based on the writing process concept, can be applied to the teaching of magazine writing. In the first part of the study, a purposeful sample of 10 members of the Magazine Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication responded to a questionnaire. The sample was not intended to be representative of the whole population but was drawn to lay the foundation for further research and to provide information for a possible representative sample to be taken later. All of the educators surveyed said they use coaching techniques; all said they coach both in and out of class; and half said they use peer coaching. In the second part of the study, students enrolled in a feature writing course were coached at every step of the writing process--idea, reporting, organization, writing, and rewriting. Students in the course were also taught to coach each other. Techniques used in the course were developed by Donald Murray at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in Florida. Anonymous course evaluations completed at the end of the course indicated unanimous support from the students for the use of coaching in the classroom. (RS)

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Writing Coaching in the Magazine Curriculum: An Exploratory Investigation

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Introduction

Writing coaching is a practice that has gained wide acceptance in the newspaper industry in the past decade. Newspaper writing coaching is a collaborative method of instruction designed to show a writer new ways of assessing ideas, reporting, focusing and organizing stories in a manner that builds the writer's confidence.

Teaching the writing process is an accepted method of teaching writing in the composition classroom. The writing process approach portrays the story as a continuum. In this article the stages of the continuum will be identified as idea, reporting, organizing, writing and rewriting.

The move to teaching the writing process has revolutionized composition instruction in the past decade. However, journalism schools have lagged behind English departments in the revolution, the research on journalism education indicates.

This paper explores how writing coaching, which is based on the writing process concept, can be applied to the teaching of magazine writing.

This investigation is based on a small purposive sample of magazine educators and an exploratory study using coaching techniques in the author's course. Both of the methods were chosen because this study attempts to break ground in an area of journalism education that has not been investigated. The purposive sample was used to lay the foundation for further research. The exploratory study of coaching techniques in the classroom was used to describe concrete examples of how techniques that have been found sound in industry and the composition classroom can be

applied in a new area.

Review of the Literature

Three writers have pointed out in the past four years in Journalism Educator that research on the writing process by composition educators could be useful in the teaching of journalism courses. All three commented that this research has received little attention in journalism research. In fact, Zurek (1986) wrote, "But despite the serious concern of the profession, journalism texts and journals show little knowledge of what might be called the current revolution in composition instruction" (p. 19).

The message of composition research is that the entire writing process should be taught. As Zurek (1986) pointed out, "This means that instead of instructors focusing on the final version of a student's piece of writing, they pay attention to all aspects of the writing process: discovering what the writer wishes to write about, gathering information, making meaning, ordering ideas, revising and editing" (p. 19).

Olson (1987) echoed this concern that journalism textbooks do not reflect the current research into composition instruction and he argued, "We cannot teach students to write by looking only at the final product" (p. 14).

In the most recent of these articles, Pitts (1989) wrote, "In the late 1970s a major paradigm shift occurred in the teaching of composition, from product-based to process-based analysis....Little of that movement has been exhibited in journalism research or teaching methodology..." (p. 12).

Both Zurek (1986) and Pitts (1989) point out the importance of

Donald Murray, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and researcher on the writing process, in bridging the gap between the composition classroom and the newsroom. In fact, his work and that of other composition researchers provides the foundation for the writing coaching movement.

The center for writing coaching is the Poynter Institute for Media Studies in St. Petersburg, Fla., where Roy Peter Clark and Don Fry teach coaching techniques to newspaper editors and journalism educators. Clark has been called "probably the first, and certainly the best known, newspaper writing coach" (Wolf and Thomason, 1986, p. 43).

Murray, now retired from teaching, demonstrated his one-on-one coaching techniques at the first conference for newspaper writing coaches at the Poynter Institute in 1985. His contributions continue to be recognized in sessions at the institute and in a forthcoming book by Clark and Fry.[1]

Murray also is credited (Clark, 1988) with giving the name "coaching" to newsroom teaching during his tenure in 1978 as a newsroom teacher at the Boston Globe:

"The name was needed to describe a new creature in American journalism, a writing teacher who would work in the newsroom as an outsider, tutoring writers and creating an environment in which good work was encouraged, recognized and rewarded" (p. 34).

The interest in coaching in the newspaper industry has remained strong during the past decade. A study of writing coaches (Laakaniemi, 1987) found 37 people working either part-time or full-time as coaches in 1983. Seventy-two coaches, editors and educators interested in coaching attended the first conference on

newspaper writing coaching at the Poynter Institute in 1985 (Salsini, 1986). Five years later, the second conference on coaching attracted 80 coaches and others interested in the field. In a survey reported at the conference, it was noted that visiting coaches had more requests for coaching than they could fill (Salsini, 1989).

Despite the interest in the industry, journalism schools have lagged behind in their use of writing coaching techniques in the teaching of writing. In fact, no evidence of published research on coaching in the classroom could be found in ERIC or the Index to Journalism Periodicals for this study.

Clark (1988) described why writing coaches are needed:

"Writers young and old crave such critical attention....They want editors to discuss story ideas, to show them new ways of seeing and reporting, to help focus and organize stories, to suggest new approaches to story telling, to help them identify what works and what needs work....The good news is that this can be accomplished without anger or animosity, in ways that build a relationship of confidence and trust between writer and editor" (p. 34).

Newspapers need coaches because too often desk editors fix stories through copy editing rather than coach writers. Don Fry (1986) draws the distinction:

"Editing aims to improve copy and get it into the paper; coaching aims to improve the processes of reporting and writing.

"Editing deals with immediate effects; coaching deals with the future performance of writers.

"Editing happens quickly, while coaching proceeds gradually,

often over long periods of time.

"Editing corrects errors, and coaching changes tendencies.

"Finally, editing focuses on written material, and coaching looks at the writer" (p. 17).

Coaching then is what journalism educators intend to do, but too often they slip into editing. Pitts (1988) writes, "I have found that if I do not carefully plan a method of evaluation, I fall into the role of copy editor" (p. 84).

If journalism educators adopt the coaching techniques for the classroom, the research suggests their most powerful teaching tool will be the individual conference.

A survey of newspaper writing coaches (Wolf and Thomason, 1986) showed newspaper writing coaches identified the conference as the most effective technique a coach can use.

Clark and Fry (in press) cited Murray for his work in understanding the importance of the conference. The method, which Murray calls "consultative editing," emphasizes the knowledge and experience of the writer, gives the writer primary responsibility for the story, provides an environment so the writer can do the best possible job and trains the writer so that editing will be unnecessary. Carole Rich (1989), a university professor who is a newspaper writing coach, confirms from her experience that the key to successful coaching in the classroom is the individual conference. She suggests coaching students throughout the writing process. She identifies three points of coaching -- coaching on the idea, coaching before the story is written and coaching after the story is written.

In addition to recommending the coach-student conference, Clark

and Fry (in press) encourage educators to teach students to coach each other. And although Pitts (1988) doesn't describe her process of peer evaluation as coaching, she confirms the value of student evaluation of each other's writing. The process, she writes, allows her to increase the amount of feedback provided to student newswriters and gives them broader perspective.

Olson (1987) mentions that a major criticism of the writing process concept is that multiple drafts are not realistic in all situations, such as breaking news. But multiple drafts are expected in magazine courses and this could be an incentive for magazine educators to consider using the techniques of coaching and the writing process concept in the classroom.

The purposive sample

Because of the lack of published research on coaching in journalism education, this study used a purposive sample to determine to what extent magazine educators employ coaching techniques in the classroom. Eleven members of the Magazine Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication were asked to fill out a questionnaire; 10 responded.

The individuals were chosen to represent different geographic regions and different sizes of journalism programs. Five of the respondents were from the Midwest, three were from the East, one was from the Southeast and one was from the Southwest. Four of the respondents came from schools with small journalism programs and the remaining six came from schools with large programs.

The sample was not intended to be representative of the whole population but was drawn to lay the foundation for further research

and to provide information for a possible representative sample of the division to be taken later.

All the educators surveyed said they use coaching techniques, as defined in this study, in their magazine writing courses. "It's hard to imagine teaching it another way," one responded.

They coach students both in and out of class. And they coach at various stages in the writing process. Some coach on all the stages outlined in this paper, some coach only on the idea and the first draft, and one coaches only on drafts but has students write three drafts of each article.

Half the educators reported they have students coach each other or use a workshop method, with the class coaching a writer. The other half of the educators have no peer coaching in their classrooms. One who did not use peer coaches wrote, "As a student, I hated this." Another who does not use peer coaching was concerned about uneven performance. This respondent wrote, "Some are bright and interested; others invest very little. (It) seems unfair to brighter students."

Those who do have students coaching students say they give instructions on how to coach, but may do so informally.

The educators were asked if they thought a writing class structured around coaching would be effective. Seven agreed, including one who wrote, "I think it's the only way to develop a professional approach to writing in an academic setting." The rest expressed reservations about a course structured around coaching. Among the responses:

"A lot will depend on the teacher/coach."

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"Only if I could effectively use all students as coaches."

The respondents also were asked what they thought were the advantages of using coaching to teach a writing class as opposed to teaching the class without coaching. All endorsed the concept of coaching. These were among the responses:

"I'm not sure you can teach any writing course without being a coach."

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"The nurturing process allows the student to take chances, revise, polish without over-concern for a grade."

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"Coaching, I think, is more of a commitment for a teacher --but we teach more and we learn more."

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"How can the class ever be taught without coaching? If everyone is working on a different article, at-large comments don't apply to many situations."

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"Class becomes a workshop, a nicer atmosphere....Students sharpen their verbal skills in articulating to others."

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"Students are interested in their own work/topic. Students are most interested in their own writing -- both in knowing strengths and problems. Coaching gets at solving problems, not just identifying them. Students see the mistake and are introduced to ways to fixing them. They learn to spot weaknesses and gain experience and confidence in fixing them, so they are more likely

to be able to do it on their own next time."

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"(It allows) much fuller instruction -- students learn how to 'see' their work 'cold' and revise it, polish it, professionalize it."

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"Verbal rather than written criticism handled properly is less threatening because of the personal exchange."

The classroom exploration

When the instructor employed coaching techniques in a Feature Writing course for this study, she was attempting to follow the techniques of coaching developed by Murray from his study of the writing process and taught at the Poynter Institute. Those techniques include listening to the writer first, discerning how the writer feels about the story so far; helping the writer identify the most important problem and asking questions so that the writer discovers what needs to be done (Clark & Fry, in press).

The instructor also taught coaching techniques to students in the course. By following established coaching techniques, the instructor was trying to demonstrate a systematic approach to coaching in the classroom, an approach that could be replicated by other educators. And by formally teaching students to coach, the instructor was trying to ensure all would have a chance at success.

Fry (Clark & Fry, in press) describes the writing process as having these five steps: select, report, organize, draft, clarify.

For this study, the steps were renamed idea, reporting, organization, writing and rewriting. Students in Feature Writing

were coached at each of these steps in writing a magazine story.

In the idea stage, each student wrote a query letter proposing an idea to a magazine editor and received oral feedback from a designated student coach, who assumed the role of the editor. The student also received written feedback from the instructor.

In the reporting stage, each student discussed problems in information gathering with the instructor. This coaching was intended not just to name other sources for the student but to lead the student to discover other sources. The instructor did this by asking questions rather than by supplying answers.

In the organization stage, students received feedback twice. Each student got immediate feedback from the instructor on the theme paragraph. This was conducted in a two-minute conference in the same class period in which the paragraph was turned in. Then the student turned in an outline at an out-of-class conference and got immediate coaching.

In the writing stage, the student turned in a copy of the first draft for the instructor and one for each member of the class. The instructor wrote comments. One classmate was assigned to be the student's coach.

Each class member had a list of criteria on which to evaluate a story. The points to consider were the lead, the focus, the presence of narration and description, the use of quotes, the ending and the flow. Grow (1987) has demonstrated the usefulness of having a checklist to evaluate magazine stories.

But in addition to the checklist, which addresses the story, students were instructed to use a set of questions to address the writer. The questions were: "What works in your story? What

doesn't work? And how do you plan to solve the problem?" These are based on the questions taught in the coaching process at the Poynter Institute. Each student coached a writer in front of the class and drew in comments from other students.

In the rewriting stage, the student talked one-on-one with the instructor and produced a final draft. The student received a grade and comments. A clean copy with the student's cover letter was mailed to the publication.

How is this different from any other course in which students critique each other's work? In this course, students receive feedback at each stage in the writing process, rather than on the finished draft. Each point at which feedback is planned coincides with a stage in the writing process, as identified by Fry. This helps students achieve success because they can be helped to find their way before they become too deeply mired in confusion and desperation that often comes with writing a magazine-length story.

The course also differs because students are taught to coach each other. This is accomplished through critiques of professional stories, which develop a vocabulary for coaching, and through discussions of how coaching is done. Like editors, students have to be reminded of the importance of praising the writer (Fry, 1988). Each student also is graded on coaching, so he or she is encouraged to take it seriously.

Students who took the course in Fall 1989 were asked to comment anonymously at the end of the course on the use of coaching in the classroom. The questions they answered were presented as a supplement to the university-mandated teaching evaluations.

All were present and filled out evaluations. They were

unanimous in their endorsement of coaching. Among the comments:

"Coaching is really the key to learning how to improve your writing. The coaching we did in class is where I think I got the most from the course."

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"I thought the coaching was helpful. I respect the opinions of my classmates, and they frequently pointed out things I should have seen but didn't. They're a great source of possible story ideas, too. I guess having to coach also forced me to look more analytically at a story...so I guess that helped. I enjoyed hearing others' thoughts on ledes and description."

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"I think it taught me how to be more critical of my own work."

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"I found the coaching session among students very valuable and helpful. I thought it was important to get a student's eye view."

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"I think in a class like this, where expression is done in the form of writing, coaching is an essential and integral part of learning. The coaching by the professor was always straightforward, positive and constructive. The coaching by the peers was interesting. Having your fellow students tell you what they think of your first draft story can be a little unnerving, but for the most part, it was enlightening. We need to know what other feature writers-to-be think of our masterpieces."

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Although student evaluations are only one measure of the effectiveness of the coaching, they do seem to provide support for

the composition research that indicates teaching the writing process is effective. Since this investigation of the use of coaching in Feature Writing, the instructor has added three refinements to the technique.

First, each student records in a weekly diary his or her progress on a complex magazine story. This can be used to analyze where students get stuck in the writing process.

Second, the student hands in a memo with each first draft. The student outlines what works in the story, what doesn't work and his or her strategy for the rewrite. Those are the questions used in the coaching session. They help the student to take responsibility for the rewrite and retain ownership of the story, which Clark and Fry (in press) have suggested is important.

Third, the instructor has made a video in which she coaches a student on a magazine story. This is shown to students before they coach as a way of demonstrating and reinforcing coaching techniques.

Conclusions

This exploratory study of coaching in the magazine curriculum has sought to show how coaching is linked to the revolution in composition research and how the results of that research can be applied in teaching magazine writing. It is the author's impression that coaching in the Feature Writing course was a useful technique because it allowed students to solve problems as they worked their way through the writing process. They seemed to produce better written first drafts because problems in conceptualizing, reporting and focusing were dealt with before the draft was written.

They seemed less frustrated and frightened by the prospect of writing a long article because they handled it step by step.

In addition to evaluating the added techniques of the diary, the memo and the video, there are other opportunities for investigating the use of coaching in the classroom. A representative study of the Magazine Division of AEJMC could be conducted to explore more extensively how coaching techniques and the writing process concept are employed in teaching magazine course. Because this study found no evidence of published research on coaching in the magazine industry, it would be helpful to expand this survey to query editors to determine where, how and to what extent coaching techniques are used on magazines.

Footnotes

[1]Based on the author's observation while attending 1985 and 1989 conferences for newspaper writing coaches and a seminar for teachers of newswriting in May 1989 at the Poynter Institute. The book is Coaching Writers: The Human Side of Editing.

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